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Sarah's circle of friends

Convicted teen gets few visitors these days, but they defend her vigorously

By Patti Murphy
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HAILEY -- Sarah Johnson, the Bellevue teenager convicted of murdering her parents, has steadfastly denied she committed the crime and has expressed hope of one day getting a new trial, says one of her only remaining friends.

"Sarah has faith that God will see her through this," said Neasha Alder, speaking on behalf of her own family.

"She has told me that she absolutely did not do it. I don't think she knows who did it, though. She's at a loss. She can't believe that people think she murdered her own parents."

Alder, 27, is the daughter of Johnson's former legal guardian, Pat Alder, and has known Johnson since the teenager was a baby.

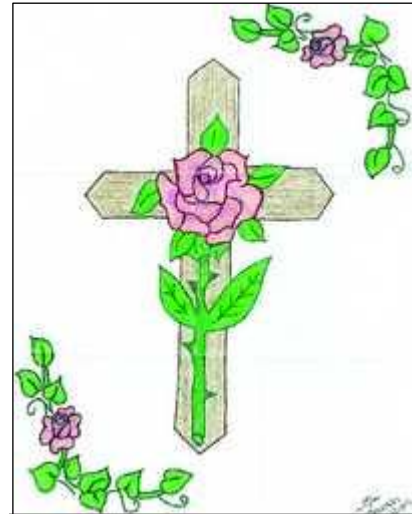
Alder and her mother are two of only a handful of people who still continue to visit Johnson regularly in jail. Other visitors include members of Johnson's defense team.

In an interview with The Times-News, Alder talked about her relationship with Johnson, and discussed the chaos and disappointment that has encircled Johnson's life since being arrested in October 2003 in connection with the deaths of her parents, Alan and Diane Johnson.

A 12-person jury convicted Sarah Johnson in March on two counts of first-degree murder. She is scheduled to be sentenced later this week.

Prosecutors argued during her trial that Johnson used a high powered hunting rifle to shoot her mother in the head as she slept, and then shoot her father through the chest as he came out of the shower. Her motive was her parents disapproval of her relationship with Bruno Santos, a 19-year-old undocumented alien with whom she was having sexual relations, prosecutors said.

Letters and drawings



Sarah Johnson often sends drawings like this one to Neasha Alder, one of her few remaining friends. 'Sarah is not the evil person that people tried to portray in the trial,' Alder says.

Alder pulled out some letters and artwork that Johnson has sent from various jails, which she's called home since she was 16 years old. The pictures include elaborate and colorful drawings of crucifixes covered in flowers.

"She can't believe that people think she murdered her own parents." -- Neasha Alder, friend of Sarah

"Sarah has a very strong Catholic faith," Alder said, referring to the crosses. She said that Johnson reads the Bible daily, a claim that also was made during the trial by one of

Johnson's former cellmates.

Johnson's favorite things to draw are crosses, horses, people and flowers, and she also makes colorful collages out of pictures torn from magazines. Alder said she delivers to Johnson books and art materials to keep her busy.

"You can only watch so much TV, and drawing is another way for her to pass the time and be creative," Alder said.

Johnson's letters from jail do not seem to express the anger or sadness you'd expect from an 18-year-old girl facing life imprisonment. They are bright and colorful and are covered in flowers, hearts and other designs.

"We will always be sisters! So please don't think you have lost a sister. Just keep praying for me to come home," she wrote from the Madison County Jail on March 28, just 12 days after her murder conviction.

"I just keep remembering that yourself (sic) and the rest of your family are out there for me ...

"If I could be put in one place and left alone, I would start to do my GED, since all I have now is time ...

"You're incredible, just like everyone else in your family."

In between compliments and niceties, Johnson almost matter-of-factly states that "things here have been a little rough," and that the Rexburg jail is "more of a drama fest than Ada County" and "it's hard to be so far away from everybody."

Then, opening up a bit more, she writes, "It's been really stressful and my belly can't handle it for too much longer. I can't believe that I am still having to deal with all this crap. I'm in total shock."

She ends her note with a drawing of a heart and the sentence, "Give everyone a hug and a kiss for me and tell them I love them."

"Sarah is not the evil person that people tried to portray in the trial," Alder said. "She has always been such a smiling, bubbling little girl. Just happy and so full of life. In spite of what she's going through, she still finds time to say, 'how are you'"

The months since Johnson's arrest have been unsettled, Alder says. Johnson had been moved from one jail to another "at least six or seven times since she was arrested."

Every time Johnson was moved to a new facility, she was faced with different rules, and was required to leave all of her belongings at the previous facility, Alder said.

"Her Bible, her books, her underwear, her bra and long johns that she wore to keep warm, it all had to be left behind," Alder said. "All the things we had bought for her were gone when she'd get moved back and forth. Jail doesn't replace this stuff."

Standing by her side

During the nearly six-week trial, Johnson watched as school friends, former jail cell mates, and family members took the stand to testify against her, characterizing her as a selfish, greedy, self-absorbed lying teen. Among the prosecution witnesses was her older brother, Matt Johnson, and her aunt, Linda Vavold.

With so many people speaking against Sarah Johnson, Alder said she wanted to speak out on her behalf because she "thinks it's important for people to see the side of Sarah that we see.

"We want to shine a light on the good side of Sarah, so people won't be confused why we're standing by her," Alder said.

Alder's mother was one of the first people Johnson called after she was arrested and she continued to call her from jail at least once a day.

Alder puts money in Sarah's jail account so she can buy items from the jail commissary, such as art supplies which she uses to create the colorful drawings and collages. Alder also has given her books, socks, underwear, lotion and other personal items that the jail does not supply.

"Sarah's parents would have wanted someone to be her voice," Alder said. "My commitment to her is forever."

Sarah's goals

Alder said that Johnson always worked hard and had many goals and dreams, some which will never be fulfilled.

"She wanted to walk with her class in graduation," Alder said. "Sarah worked hard for 11 years toward graduation, so of course she is extremely disappointed."

Johnson hopes to finish her GED and work on college courses if possible, Alder said. At one point she wanted to attend college in Oregon, and then teach young children afterward.

Alder said Johnson had started taking a correspondence course at the jail in Burley, but stopped during the trial.

"She has been moved around so much that she hasn't been able to get back to working on it," she said.

Grieving

A concern for Alder is that Johnson has not adequately grieved over her parents, so she has given her books to help her move through that issue.

"She misses her dad terribly," Alder said. "She talks about both parents with fond memories, about trips that they took, and holidays. It's very painful for her to talk about them."

Alder believes that Johnson's attorneys and her own family fill the void of Johnson's blood relatives, many of whom testified against her in her trial.

"Sarah is very disappointed in her family," Alder said. "She desperately wanted their love and support."

"Even if she was guilty, which she's not, I wouldn't turn my back on her."

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